

SERMON TITLE: "Renewing Our Resolutions: Witness"
SERMON TEXT: Acts 10:34-48
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James
OCCASION: January 30, 2022 at First UMC

INTRODUCTION

A couple weeks ago, I read an article in *The Salt Lake Tribune*. The article was an interview of Brian Covey, a football receiver for the University of Utah Utes. The article could have been about football plays in the recent Rose Bowl game on New Year's Day. But, instead, the interview was a lot more about Brian Covey's religious faith as a returned missionary and active member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints.

When the interviewer asked Covey if he ever had any football opponents who made his faith difficult, Brian described a situation from his sophomore year, when the Utes were playing against the University of Washington. Brian got tackled by a guy much bigger than him. While Brian was still on the ground suffering from the blow, one of the Washington players walked past and snarled, "That's what you get, Jesus boy." Covey reported that he has heard that kind of remark on the field more than once. But he said he hasn't minded. "I'm happy to be called 'Jesus boy,'" he said. "That's a compliment, you know . . . Football has given me a platform to really show that Christ is the most important thing to me."*

In this first month of this New Year, we've been talking about the vows we make when we join a United Methodist church. As we just witnessed in our worship service this morning, when new persons join our congregation, they make some important promises. But they aren't alone in those vows, since everyone in the worship service is also given an opportunity to respond with our own re-commitment to participate faithfully in the congregation with our prayers, our presence, our gifts, our service, and our witness. Today, we're exploring that last one. We may not be football players with a big audience. But as United Methodists, we're still faced with this question of, "How do we represent Christ on the field of life?" What does it mean for us to renew our resolution to participate faithfully as a witness?

1—SAYS, “JESUS CHRIST IS LORD OF ALL”

To help us find some answers to this question, we’re going to consider the story from Acts 10. And right away, in verse 36, we see that a witness is one who says, “Jesus Christ is Lord of all.”

In this story, it was the Apostle Peter who was speaking. You might recall that Peter was one of those fishermen whom Jesus had called to leave behind their nets and become fishers of people. Because Peter was Jewish, up until now he had mostly been talking about Jesus with other Jewish people. But, in this story in Acts 10, Peter was addressing a bunch of Romans who were gathered in the house of Cornelius, a Roman military leader. This incident took place in Caesarea, a Palestinian city which had been taken over by the Romans and named after Caesar, the king or emperor, of the vast Roman Empire. The various Caesars were powerful guys, who wanted everyone to think of them as gods. *Divine, all supreme,* and *Lord* were terms associated with the Roman emperors. And, yet, it was in that context that Peter boldly testified, “Jesus Christ is Lord of all.”

Peter was challenging the political power of his day by naming someone else who was more worthy of allegiance and devotion. Peter was denying the divinity of Caesar and exalting Jesus Christ instead. Such a pronouncement was amazing on a couple of fronts. It was incredible for Peter to even be talking with the Roman gentiles because his Jewish upbringing limited those with whom he could associate. In the earlier verses of Acts, chapter 10, you can see how hard God had to work to persuade Peter that it was OK even to step foot inside Cornelius’ house. And then, for Peter to be brave enough to tell those sword-carrying Roman soldiers that their exalted Caesar wasn’t the ultimate one they thought—that there was someone else, instead, to whom they owed their loyalty—wow! It’s no wonder that, in the original Greek language of the New Testament, they used the same word for *witness* and *martyr*. To speak like that could get you killed.

But Peter knew what he had to do and what he had to say. As his fellow apostle Paul wrote in *his* letter to the Christians at Rome, we need to confess with our lips that Jesus Christ is Lord, not only for our *own* salvation, but so *others* can hear the good news as well. “How are they to believe in one of whom

they have never heard?” asked Paul. “And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him?” (Romans 10:9-14).

Some time ago, I heard a radio interview of a musician who said that he grew up in a part of the United States “where Elvis was king and Jesus was Lord.” Well, for us United Methodist Christians, Jesus needs to be both our king and our Lord. We need to allow him to rule in our hearts and our behaviors. And we need to be willing to speak about how important Jesus is in our lives. To be a faithful witness, we need to say, “Jesus Christ is Lord of all.”

2—KNOW AND TELL THE BASICS OF FAITH

This story in Acts gives us a second idea of what it means to be a faithful witness. We need to know and tell the basics of faith. We see this in verses 37 through 43, where Peter was laying it out to the Gentiles gathered at Cornelius’ house. Peter explained that Jesus’ ministry began after his baptism by John and then spread throughout Judea. God anointed Jesus with the Holy Spirit and power, so that Jesus was able to heal those who were oppressed. Then Jesus was put to death on a tree, and God raised him on the third day. Afterward, Jesus appeared to many people, eating and drinking with some, and commanding them to testify that forgiveness of sins is possible through his name.

Bible scholars tell us that this little summary given by Peter was an early church creed. The earliest Christians used creeds to help the believers learn the basic doctrines of the Christian faith. They didn’t have New Testaments back then that they could turn to chapter and verse, so they needed simple creedal statements that they could memorize. Hymns worked the same way. If they could sing it, they could remember it. Kind of like memorizing times tables helps you do math problems, if you knew your creeds and hymns, you would know what you believed and you would be able to share that knowledge easily with other people.

So, how well do you know your Christian basics? If you were asked or had an opportunity to tell someone what you, as a Christian, believe, what would you say? Would you start with Jesus? Would you tell how God came in human flesh as a baby, lived a human life, called disciples, and taught people how to

live? Would you tell how Jesus healed the sick, forgave sinners, and offered love to outcasts? Would you tell how Jesus challenged the religious and political leaders of his day, and that caused him to be crucified? Would you tell that, even while hanging on a cross, Jesus offered forgiveness and compassion to those around him? Would you tell how the disciples' grief turned to joy when they discovered that God had raised Jesus from the dead? Would you share how God's forgiving and resurrecting power has affected your life for the better and given you hope and strength through hard times? As the choir sang, witnesses "love to tell the story." If we're going to be a witness for Jesus, then we need to know and be able to tell the basics of Christian faith.

3—HAVE A SPIRITUAL GROWING EDGE

But our Christian witness isn't just about saying, "Jesus is Lord," and being able to list some basic beliefs. I guess one of the reasons we United Methodists don't recite creeds every Sunday in worship is that we don't want to get stuck in a black-and-white, fundamentalist position, where we think we've already learned all there is to know. In the tradition of John Wesley, United Methodists are a people who are constantly "going on to perfection." That means we're always striving to understand more and do better. It's great to look back on the day of our salvation and have assurance in our hearts that we have been forgiven by God. But we should never be satisfied with what happened in the past. We should always have a current spiritual growing edge. We should have a place where God is engaging and challenging us today—where we feel spiritually alive.

In Acts 10, for Peter, the spiritual growing edge was coming to the recognition that God could accept Gentile believers. Salvation wasn't limited to just those of Jewish ancestry and traditions. In verses 44-46, even Peter's companions witnessed this astounding act of God, that God's Holy Spirit was poured out on even uncircumcised Romans! It's hard for us today to realize how radical that was for Peter and the earliest Christians. God was definitely pushing them out of their comfort zone and challenging their long-held beliefs about who could or could not be considered righteous. God was

teaching them that the basics of faith they had learned as Jewish children needed some updating in the new culture and times in which they lived.

Similarly for us today, we also need to be open and engaged in faith development, moving on to perfection, and working on our spiritual growing edge. While there are some unfailing truths—like “Jesus loves me, this I know”—that we can hang on to through thick and thin, we really don’t learn everything we need to know in kindergarten Sunday School. If that’s all we’ve got and just keep repeating that, week after week through the rest of our lives, our faith is going to get pretty stale, and I doubt very many people are going to be interested in what we have to say.

Have you noticed that the times when people are most open to talking about religion are when something bad or controversial is happening? And have you noticed that those difficult times are precisely when black-and-white answers don’t seem sufficient? Have you also noticed that those are the times when *you* have the most trouble talking about what you believe? That’s why we United Methodists need to be in regular study about our faith. What *do* we believe when bad things happen to good people, and how *does* God relate to people of all nations, races, and orientations? Times change, circumstances change, and our faith needs to adapt and grow or we’ll wake up one day and realize that our faith isn’t adequate for the problems we face. Consequently, our witness will be irrelevant at best, and possibly even harmful. If we want to have a witness that is meaningful, then we have to have a spiritual growing edge.

CONCLUSION

To conclude this sermon, I want to leave you with a paraphrase of First Peter 3:15. That Bible verse essentially says that, no matter what happens, we must be ready to explain what and why we believe. Christians are called to be faithful witnesses in our behaviors, our attitudes, and *our words*. That’s why I hope you will join me in renewing our resolution of witness.